Work-related proactivity through the lens of narrative: Investigating emotional journeys in the process of making things happen

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Abstract: Organizations benefit from proactive employees who initiate improvements at work. Although evidence suggests happy employees are more likely to become proactive, the emotional journeys employees take during the process of making things happen, and their implications for future proactivity at work, remain unclear. To develop an understanding of patterns of emotions in the process of proactivity, I conducted a qualitative study based on 92 proactivity episodes by employees and their managers in the service center of a multinational organization. Findings, through the lens of narrative, indicate emotional journeys in proactivity took different forms. First, a *proactivity-as-frustration* narrative captured individuals' emotional patterns of proactivity as a consistently unpleasant action when initiated and seen through. Second, a *proactivity-as-threat* narrative captured instances of proactivity that derailed at the onset, due to feelings of fear. Third, a *proactivity-as-growth* narrative, although initially characterized by negative emotions, gave way to feelings such as excitement, joy, and pride in the process, as well as to sustained motivation to engage in proactivity. Overall, findings of this research show that as employees embark in showing initiative in their organization, they are set on different emotional paths that, in turn, likely impact their future willingness to become proactive at work.

Keywords: Proactivity, Affect, Discrete emotions, Motivation, Narrative, Qualitative methods

Work-related proactivity through the lens of narrative:

Investigating emotional journeys in the process of making things happen

To perform well, employees are required more than ever not only to comply with goals that are set by their organizations, but also to be self-starting and make things happen at work (Frese and Fay, 2001; Griffin et al., 2007). Against this background, research on proactivity focuses on explaining how employees actively take ownership in their jobs, with the goal of bringing about future-oriented changes at work (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010). A large body of evidence suggests proactivity is distinct from other behavioral concepts (Griffin et al., 2007; Van Dyne and Le Pine, 1998), and thus merits separate investigation. Here, the focus is on work-related proactivity, which encompasses changes in the work environment (rather than changes in oneself) and includes, for example, taking charge to bring about change, preventing local problems, and voicing constructive concerns at work (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker and Collins, 2010). The overall relevance of work-related proactivity for organizations, combined with meta-analytic evidence that proactive behaviors can promote important outcomes, such as job satisfaction, socialization, and performance at work (Thomas et al., 2010; Tornau and Frese, 2013), indicates the importance of understanding how employees are motivated to engage in and sustain proactivity at work, in order for organizations to benefit from their staff's initiatives.

Because proactive behaviors are self-initiated, research has assumed the way employees feel at work, that is, their affect (Russell, 2003), is an important intrinsic motivator of proactivity, over and above employees' more stable, dispositional characteristics. As such, employees' emotions may provide an important lever in helping organizations understand how and when staff will engage in this desirable type of performance at work (Parker et al., 2010; Cangiano et al., 2017). In addition, initial evidence suggests the engagement in proactivity may, in turn, impact employees' affect (e.g., Fay and Hüttges, 2017). However,

we currently lack comprehensive insights into how affect unfolds during the process of proactivity, that is, into employees' *emotional journeys* in the process of proactivity.

Moreover, although a large body of research has established that positive affect, that is, pleasant feelings at work, are important for work-related proactivity (Bindl et al., 2012; Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007; Fay and Sonnentag, 2012; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015), evidence on the role of negative feelings for proactivity remains mixed. Existing research suggests the role of negative affect may vary greatly from positive or negative, to non-significant, associations with work-related proactivity (e.g., Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007); or it may be relevant for some parts of the process of engaging in proactivity but not for others (Bindl et al., 2012; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015). Research is now needed that provides an in-depth investigation of *how* and *why* affect, including negative affect, is important in the process of engaging in proactivity, to develop more differentiated theory on the role of affect for proactivity. Relatedly, previous research has also predominantly focused on investigating employees' moods, that is, general feelings at work (Russell, 2003), whereas research is yet to investigate discrete emotions that occur in relation to the proactive process itself. Emotions are important because they are directly related to a person or event and they strongly predict distinct behaviors. Emotions may also dissipate into moods (Rosenberg, 1998), indicating that understanding their role in the process of proactivity is essential.

To develop theory on the role of emotional experiences in the process of work-related proactivity, this paper investigates the context of a call center in a multinational energy provider. Evidence suggests work in call centers is stressful (Sprigg and Jackson, 2006) and that autonomy is restricted (Hackman and Oldham, 1976; Holman, 2005). In this context, previous research has shown employees may importantly engage in work-related proactivity in response to stressors (Fay and Sonnentag, 2002), where the focus of proactivity may be more on helping to take away stressors or hindrances at work (Spychala and Sonnentag,

2011), rather than on thinking more broadly about how to explore an ideal future in the organization (see Strauss and Parker, 2018). In this context, the focus here is on forms of work-related proactivity that are possibly more naturally aligned with constrained work environments, in which the focus is on maintaining efficiency of work (Adler and Borys, 1996; Engel, 1970). Because negative affect is overall likely to occur in these types of work contexts, the call center was a particularly relevant context for investigating the role of negative emotional experiences, in addition to positive affect, in the process of proactivity.

Specifically, this study takes the view of investigating the role of affect for proactivity through individuals' lived experience in proactivity, using a qualitatively grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). In particular, I used the perspective of narrative, that is, individuals' own representations of the connections between their past, present, as well as future events (McAdams, 1999; Pentland, 1999), with a focus on emotional experiences in the proactivity process. In doing so, this study sets out to offer several key contributions to the existing literature. First, this research investigates the role of affect for the entirety of the proactivity process. Whereas previous research mostly focused on affect as a precursor of proactivity (e.g., Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007), or on correlations between affect and phases of proactivity (e.g., Bindl et al., 2012), the present research contributes by illuminating the role of emotions across the entire process of engaging in proactivity. Relatedly, whereas most research has focused on employees' general moods or trait affectivity in predicting their engagement in proactivity (Cangiano et al., 2017), the focus here is on discrete emotions that are directly linked with the process of engaging in proactivity. Understanding these emotions is essential because they provide direct insights into why employees will choose to engage in, sustain, or stop engaging in proactivity at work. Finally, the lens of narrative in this study adds a novel perspective to research on proactivity at work more generally, by illuminating the lived experiences of proactive employees.

Emotional experiences in the process of proactivity

Affect refers to "consciously accessible feelings" (Fredrickson, 2001: 218). Research suggests employees who experience positive affect, such as feeling excited, enthused, and inspired, at work are more likely to engage in work-related proactivity (Bindl et al., 2012; Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007; Fay and Sonnentag, 2012; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015). Theoretically, positive affect should promote proactivity to the extent that positive feelings encourage employees to embrace more challenging goals (Ilies and Judge, 2005) and to persist in the pursuit of their goals (Isen and Reeve, 2005). Positive affect has also been linked to improved cognitive flexibility and decision making (Fredrickson, 2001), with positive orientations (Forgas and George, 2001), as well as an impetus to engage in positive actions (Russell, 2003). By contrast, research suggests that negative affect, including feeling afraid, angry, or upset, may signal to individuals that a situation requires changing (Carver and Scheier, 1990) and tends to narrow one's attentional focus (Higgins, 1997). Previous research has often produced inconclusive results regarding the link between negative affect and proactivity (Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007; Fritz and Sonnentag, 2009), although recent conceptual work has argued investigating discrete negative emotions, rather than general moods, in proactivity is important (Cangiano et al., 2017; Lebel, 2017).

In this context, affect may vary in the form of *moods* and *emotions* at work (Brief and Weiss, 2002). Proactivity research to date has mainly focused on the role of moods in employee proactivity, rather than on exploring emotional experiences that are directly related to proactive goal episodes (Cangiano et al., 2017). This distinction matters such that whereas moods constitute pervasive background feelings at work, emotions are more intense and directly connected with a specific event or person and may powerfully direct individuals' behaviors with regard to the situation (Rosenberg, 1998). Emotions may also, over time, dissolve into more general moods (Frijda, 1993), which makes investigating emotional

experiences as a source of more enduring affect in the workplace imperative (Warr, 2007). How employees emotionally experience the process of engaging in work-related proactivity across time is currently unclear, although research on proactivity more generally has pointed out that discrepancies between one's current situation and a more desired situation should result in negative emotions (Strauss and Parker, 2018). In turn, in the context of perceiving stressors or roadblocks at work, research has indicated individuals are likely to engage in work-related proactivity (Fay and Sonnentag, 2002; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015). In this context, whereas the focus of research has been on elaborating the role of positive affect for proactivity, negative emotions may matter as well for shaping the proactivity process.

With a focus on proactivity as a process across time, theory on proactive motivation has also shown work-related proactivity can be represented as a goal-driven process. Different authors have identified comparable representations of this process. Most notably, all of the models propose an initial phase, referred to as "anticipation," "proactive goal generation," or "issue identification" (respectively: Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015). This initial phase of the proactivity process encompasses mainly cognitive processes that take place before an employee engages in actual change-related behaviors, and that relate to employees' generation of specific proactive goals they wish to pursue. Authors have contrasted this initial phase with a second, core phase relating to "action," "proactive goal striving," or "implementation" (respectively: Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015). In this second phase of the proactivity process, employees engage in overt behaviors to achieve these proactive goals by implementing changes to work tasks, such as taking action to voice suggestions to relevant stakeholders, or to take charge of improving a specific work process (e.g., Parker and Collins, 2010). By exploring individuals' emotional experiences across this process, we may gain important insights into how to motivate staff to engage in and sustain proactivity at work.

Methods

To develop an understanding of emotional experiences in the process of engaging in work-related proactivity, I used an interpretivist approach to data collection and analysis that involved an iterative process of alternating between data collection, analysis of the data, and theorizing (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are particularly appropriate for elaborating theory on complex processes (Lee et al., 1999). In particular, I used the perspective of narrative (McAdams, 1999; Pentland, 1999), which highlights the lived experiences of individuals (Chase, 2005). In this context, previous research in *Human Relations* has shown narratives may provide meaningful insights into the lived realities of individuals at work (e.g., Clarke et al., 2009; Dunford and Jones, 2000).

Specifically, I entered into data collection interested in emotional experiences of employees and managers regarding their engagement in work-related proactivity in the service center. As I immersed myself in the data, I found distinct patterns, in reports of participants, of their emotional experiences across the process of proactivity. As a result, I began to focus more specifically on how and why narratives varied as participants told of their engagements in work-related proactivity. Below, I describe the organizational context of this investigation, as well as the procedures of data collection and analysis used in this study.

Research context

The study took place at the service center of a multinational energy company based in the UK. Eighteen frontline employees (referred to as "employees") and 21 managerial employees ("managers") across three main service-center locations in the organization participated, based on the theoretical-sampling premise of achieving maximum variation (Polkinghorne, 2005). Here, the different hierarchical ranks of participants served as a proxy for different job roles at the service center of the organization that might affect individuals' experience of engaging in proactive behaviors. Employees' ages ranged from 21 to 56 years,

mean tenure was three years, and 71% were female. Managers ranged from 24 to 55 years of age, mean tenure was eight years, and 71% were female. These figures were representative of the organization, as indicated by internal figures at the time of investigation.

Through initial job observations and interviews, as well as organizational data, I learned employees in this study spent most of their time answering customer calls. These calls included inquiries about billing issues, reporting problems with one's meter, or arranging new services. During their typical shifts, employees had direct contact with team managers. Team managers spent their time overseeing the work of employees by walking around the floor and observing their behavior, monitoring phone calls, and meeting with them to discuss their performance. Team managers, in turn, were supervised by section managers. These section managers oversaw the work of groups of three to five team managers and managed specific divisions, such as *Prepayments* or *Customer Transfers*. Finally, customer-service managers served as supervisors to the section managers. Customer-service managers were responsible for ensuring high customer service in their divisions, as well as for the strategic planning of their division.

Through job observations and interviews, in particular, I learned employees' work differed substantially from the work done by the three levels of management. Specifically, employees' discretion in the job was significantly constrained as they were encouraged to follow process maps that outlined how to deal with customer queries. The next higher hierarchical level of team managers, by contrast, only dealt with more complex customer issues employees passed on to them, which they resolved under their own direction. Employees' discretion was also restricted in other regards. For instance, employees were, as a rule, to remain seated at their desks, whereas all three levels of managers moved around freely on the floor, attending to managerial tasks as well as to functional tasks relating to achieving business results in their respective sections. Similarly, employees' monetary

discretion was restricted such that in cases of customer complaints, managers often needed to get involved in authorizing the transaction. In sum, in addition to the overall work context of the call center being a constrained one (Holman, 2005), frontline employees in this study, in comparison to managers at the service center, had additionally low levels of discretion in their jobs. Against this background, the organizational context of the service center was a particularly interesting one in which to investigate the role of emotional experiences, and particularly, the role of negative emotional experiences, in the process of work-related proactivity, from the perspectives of individuals across different ranks at the service center.

Data collection

The data used for this investigation were based on 60 face-to-face interviews with 39 participants. All participants were invited to take part in interviews on work quality in service centers and were assured confidentiality to the extent that findings from the interviews were fed back to the organization in a way that would not reveal their identity. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Typically, interviews lasted 45–60 minutes. In the initial round of interviews, informants were asked to report on both past and ongoing episodes of proactivity. In addition, 21 participants were interviewed a second time, approximately one to two months after the first set of interviews. This approach served more generally as a verification of understanding proactive episodes reported in the first round of interviews, as well as to follow up on the remaining process of any proactive efforts that had been ongoing at Time 1. Follow-up interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes. The focus was on re-interviewing employees as well as managers (Polkinghorne, 2005), and I continued to collect data until no new information was apparent in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol (Seidman, 1991; see Appendix A, available online) in which some questions were pre-determined but the interviewer was able to ask follow-up questions in order to probe more deeply into participants' experiences. For

the purpose of this study, the interviewer asked participants whether they could think of times they had taken action to take charge of an issue at work or were currently in the process of doing so. If participants could identify such a time, the interviewer asked them to describe the process, how it unfolded, and any repercussions and implications, including what feelings, if any, they incurred in the process. Participants were also asked whether they had recognized a problem or an opportunity for initiative but decided not to do anything about it, or invested efforts but failed, including any emotional experiences incurred in these instances.

I also conducted overt, non-participant observations (Whyte, 1979). Specifically, 15 employees and their managers were shadowed for about two hours while they carried out their routine work, which helped me familiarize myself with work procedures at the service center as well as the culture of the organization. My observations were also helpful for further clarifying the content of the interviews, and to understand the work lives of the participants.

Data analysis

I analyzed the data in three stages. In *stage 1*, I extracted accounts of work-related proactivity by employees and managers from the interview transcripts and entered them into NVivo, a software for coding and analyzing qualitative data. Accounts resulted from participants' descriptions of why and how they had engaged in proactivity, including the outcomes of their initiative. I shared these episodes of proactivity with two management students and a colleague, who independently read each episode and discussed the extent to which they corresponded to work-related proactivity. I conducted these independent coding checks to verify that my understanding of how proactivity manifests itself in a service center was plausible against the background of previous theory on proactivity (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Griffin et al., 2007).[1] All 92 final episodes matched the definition of work-related proactivity, that is, of employees actively taking ownership in their jobs with the goal of

[1] For the purpose of this study, I retained for further analysis those episodes that were directed at changing the work environment at the service center, rather than at changing oneself (Parker and Collins, 2010).

bringing about future-oriented changes at work, as set by existing theory (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Parker et al., 2010). Four employees did not report any episodes of work-related proactivity, and the final analyses in this study are thus based on 35 participants.

Stage 2. In an initial run through the data, I added provisional codes that were a priori specified on theoretical constructs based on previous literature on affect and proactivity (Eisenhardt, 1989). This stage of coding also allowed for open codes that captured phases in the proactive process and indicators of emotional experiences, coming directly from participants' words (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I discuss both groups of codes below.

First, from participants' accounts of proactivity, I uncovered the two main phases in the proactivity process that previous models of proactivity have established. *Issue identification* (Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015) captured the initial phase in the process in which participants identified and decided to take ownership of improving a work process at the service center.[2] *Implementation* (Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015) comprised actions participants took to bring about an improvement in the identified issue. An additional code emerged on *reflection*, which some proactivity process models have not incorporated (Grant and Ashford, 2008; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015), although Parker and colleagues (2010) have discussed it as a part of proactive goal striving. Reflection comprised an overall evaluation of proactivity and was an important step that occurred after the end of action taken toward the initial work issue.

Second, I coded for all instances within the episodes of proactivity whereby participants reported their emotional experiences in the process. Specifically, I initially coded emotions in accounts of participants into higher-order codes based on the pre-existing theory of the circumplex model of affect (Remington et al., 2000; Russell, 2003). I checked my coding with two trained psychology students (the coding guideline is available upon request). The two coders independently coded the indicators of emotions into categories of positive versus

[2] Although participants were asked to report work-related proactivity more broadly, participants predominantly reported on a form of work-related proactivity that corresponds to dealing with stressors and issues at work. Hence, I adopted the language of Sonnentag and Starzyk (2015) for describing this phase of the process.

negative affect. Overall, participants reported 36 different indicators of emotions, of which 18 consisted of indicators of *negative affect* (e.g., feeling frustrated, angry, distressed, feeling disappointed, discouraged, or exhausted) and 18 of *positive affect* (e.g., feeling comfortable, pleased, relaxed, excited, enthusiastic, or joyful; see Appendix C for a detailed overview of all emotional experiences reported by informants). Individual participants mostly reported both positive and negative emotional experiences across episodes of proactivity, rendering a simple trait-consistent explanation of emotional experiences in proactivity to be less likely.

Stage 3. In an additional run through the data, I identified open codes that captured when and why participants reported specific qualities of emotional experiences. First, within the three main stages of issue identification, implementation, and reflection, participants reported *when* they experienced emotions, in connection with distinct steps in the process of engaging in proactivity. These "emotional process steps" included the following: in the issue-identification phase—*identifying initial work situation*, *deciding to take action in the situation*, and, in some cases, *abandoning goal to initiate change*; in the implementation phase—*starting to implement a proactive goal* and *monitoring progress of an ongoing initiative*; and in the reflection phase—*reflecting on past proactivity*, as well as *determining motivation toward future proactivity*. I also developed open codes for *why* participants reported forms of emotions across these different steps, to more fully understand the mechanisms of emotional experiences in proactivity. To keep track of the codes that were developed, I placed them in code lists that included the code and its definition. As coding continued, I began to classify these open codes under larger, second-order themes. For instance, I classified the open codes of "learning from the initiative," "developing skills," and "immersing in new tasks" as formulated by participants under the second-order theme of *low-risk novelty of action in initiative* (see Appendix C, available online, for an overview).

I used matrix coding to analyze these data, in order to identify patterns within and

between emotional experiences reported by participants at different steps in the process. I analyzed accounts by individuals at lower and higher ranks in the service center separately, and then identified similarities and differences in the resulting patterns for both groups. At this stage, substantial differences emerged in the predominant patterns of emotional experiences narrated by participants *across* the process of proactivity (Pentland, 1999). In turn, the findings of this study provide an in-depth account of emotional experiences in the process of engaging in proactivity in the service center, through the lens of narrative.

Findings

In this section, I explain how individuals in the service center reported emotional experiences across the process of proactivity, including its overarching phases of *issue identification*, *implementation*, and *reflection*. Specifically, three core forms of narrative emerged in the words of participants, each representing distinct emotional journeys in the proactivity process. In the first narrative, the process of proactivity started off in the issue-identification phase with participants reporting negative emotional experiences of anger and frustration that motivated their proactivity, which, during the subsequent phases of the process, predominantly gave way to feelings of nervousness and disappointment. Because of the consistent theme of negative emotions experienced across the entire process, which originated in feelings of anger and frustration, I refer to this narrative as the *proactivity-as-frustration* narrative. A second narrative emerged in the words of informants where the proactivity process similarly started with individuals' negative emotions of anger and frustration; however, importantly, another type of emotion was present at the issue-identification phase that was, at this stage of the process, unique to this form of narrative: feelings of fear. In this context, informants reported how they experienced feelings of anxiety and worry about their prospective engagement in proactivity and thus decided not to proceed to the implementation phase. Because of the important element of fear in causing an end to

one's initiative before actual implementation, I henceforth refer to this narrative as the *proactivity-as-threat* narrative. A third form of narrative emerged in reports of informants that, although initially characterized by negative emotions of anger and frustration in the phase of issue identification, quickly gave way to predominantly positive emotions, such as feeling excited, happy, and proud, as proactive episodes progressed. Because this narrative represented an overall positive evaluative trajectory from negative emotional experiences at the start of the process to predominantly positive emotional experiences as the process progressed, I refer to this narrative as the *proactivity-as-growth* narrative. In the following sections of this paper, I first provide evidence on each narrative of proactivity in the words of informants, and I then develop theory on key mechanisms that distinguished these narratives.

Narrative 1: Proactivity-as-frustration

In this narrative, which was predominant for employees at lower ranks in the service center, at the onset of proactivity, participants described how a work process they identified as dysfunctional for their work induced negative emotions mainly related to feelings of anger. As I elaborate next, these negative feelings in relation to the work process, in turn, often prompted individuals to make a decision to take action to improve the existing work process.

Identifying initial work situation and deciding to take action. Individuals reported negative emotions, such as feeling *annoyed*, *angry*, *frustrated*, or *distressed*, in connection with identifying that a work situation did not function in desirable ways. These feelings, in turn, constituted a core motivation for employees to decide to take action to improve their work situation. The accounts of Charlotte and Barbara both illustrate how participants made the decision to voice their concerns over a dysfunctional work situation:

> Your phone is ringing constantly which is fine, but when it is for someone who you don't even know is in and you can't actually get hold of them to pass it through it is very frustrating. … so I just collated information and said "we cannot go on like this." (Charlotte, employee)

> If something is not right or I don't agree with something then there is no point in sitting

> there and mulling it over and getting stressed about it if you are not going to say anything. (Barbara, employee)

In this context, employees like Charlotte and Barbara typically decided to act to improve the situation through articulating their concerns and suggestions to management or colleagues in other departments, rather than through directly implementing a change, given their lack of authority in initiating changes to organizational processes at the service center:

> Just little things like that in your normal day that you need to keep ringing through to another Department–things like that can just get you stressed and make you work so much harder …[so I] just rang through to the Department … and said "we've got a few examples where this has happened and these dates aren't matching and we are being told we can't change them so can you change the dates on these accounts?" and they said "oh yes, we will get them sorted out for you," and I've not had one since I don't think. (Barbara, employee)

Next, in the implementation phase, participants reported on action undertaken to reach an improvement at work on an identified issue. Communicating with relevant stakeholders in the organization often characterized this phase—even if the end goal of their initiatives was not to merely voice a concern or suggestion on improvement, but rather to themselves initiate the required changes. For instance, participants frequently sought out information to make informed decisions on how to best change a process, or presented the work issue to relevant stakeholders to seek their support in this matter. In the implementation phase, participants reported negative emotional experiences, in connection with two main steps of the process: *starting to implement a proactive goal* and *monitoring progress of an ongoing initiative*.

Starting to implement a proactive goal. Here, participants described negative emotions, such as feeling nervous, when starting to implement their initiatives, due to the novelty of proactive actions they mostly perceived as high risk. For instance, Kevin, whose role as an employee consisted of taking calls from customers, described how he felt nervous when telling management his ideas for improving a work process, although his suggestions were ultimately welcomed and implemented. Similarly, Sue experienced nervousness when presenting to managers the results of a process she had taken upon herself to improve:

> I was a bit nervous to start off with. It was a bit daunting to be in front of the managers and put my point across. But generally there was a consensus and they were agreeing with what I was saying and they were discussing something similar anyway which is why it led to being changed in the end. (Kevin, employee)

> [Management] didn't realize…why are these calls coming through and why is it on a regular basis…we must be doing something wrong with the customer saying "my bill is wrong." [So] I had to present what I've been doing for the past four weeks [in taking charge to investigate this issue] in front of all Section heads and Managers and I was proper nervous. (Sue, employee)

In sum, participants typically perceived the novelty of actions, which often included presenting their ideas to management at higher ranks, as risky, leading to anxiety-related emotions. Although these findings relate to negative emotional experiences mainly at the start of implementing an initiative, additional findings emerged as ongoing initiatives progressed.

Monitoring progress of an ongoing initiative. An additional theme of how the implementation phase influenced participants' emotions related to the degree of impact—the extent to which participants understood the progress and scope of change of their initiative when monitoring their ongoing initiatives. In the proactivity-as-frustration narrative, participants reported how during their ongoing initiative the perceived impact of one's efforts was often low, and this low perceived impact resulted in negative emotions in the process. In this context, Steven described how, although having his manager listen to his initial ideas felt good, his feelings quickly turned negative when he did not learn about any progress of his initiative in the organization:

> I think the company loses a lot of custom in the way that they produce some information on the bills...so I provided some feedback to say "look you could really provide it this way and you would probably keep a lot of your existing customers"… [my manager] took it on quite well and said he would pass it on but you never hear anything back, any feedback. …it feels good to have an idea especially when it is welcomed by a Manager. Half of it feels great, half of it feels bad because, as I said, you never ever hear any feedback in relation to any suggestions that you did before. (Steven, employee)

This illustration indicates how individuals, especially at lower ranks, depended on higher-up management to provide them with information and timely feedback on ongoing

initiatives, to learn about the impact they were making on their initiatives. However, management often did not provide this ongoing access to feedback and information, inducing feelings of disappointment in employees during the implementation phase of proactivity.

Further, when initiatives concluded, participants reported emotional experiences in the context of overall reflecting on past proactivity. Importantly, as I elaborate next, individuals' emotional experiences in this phase shaped their motivation to engage in future proactivity.

Reflecting on past proactivity. In reflecting on whether their past proactive efforts had overall been a success, because of a previous lack of understanding of the progress and scope of change in earlier stages of the process, individuals in the proactivity-as-frustration narrative mainly relied on others' evaluation of their initiative to make sense of its overall success. Such external feedback on employees' initiatives typically originated from managers. In those accounts in which initiatives were successful, employees reported positive emotional experiences, such as feeling contented and satisfied. For instance, Lydia described how she felt good upon receiving positive reactions from her line manager on her past efforts to improve an organizational process:

> [I] voiced [my opinion] first of all to [my manager] verbally and then put it all in an email constructively and forwarded it on to her and then she took that into a meeting with her manager when they had the weekly meeting. … My Manager said to me "if you don't tell me I don't know. If no one tells me I will go into this meeting and say this trial is brilliant, my team loves it." So when she said that I thought "right, ok then." So I felt good that I had got it off my chest and voiced my opinion. (Lydia, employee)

Lydia's example illustrates how the phase of overall reflection influenced participants' affect at the end of proactive episodes. In particular, individuals in this narrative tended to rely mostly on informal feedback by management of their initiatives. Instances of positive feedback led to an improvement of affect, at the very end of the episode, and predisposed individuals to be happy to engage in similar work issues again, in the future. However, as I elaborate next, such positive feedback at the end of initiatives was often not provided.

Determining motivation to engage in future proactivity. Individuals' predominant focus

on external feedback from managers for their initiatives in this narrative meant they experienced negative emotions, such as feelings of disappointment and discouragement, at the end of the proactivity process when management failed to show appreciation for initiatives. For instance, Carolyn reported that she took charge of an organizational issue, but management at the service center reprimanded her for not having sought permission to do so. Carolyn's negative feelings in response to this lack of appreciation caused her to not only feel disappointed at the end of her initiative, but also to question the purpose of engaging in similar forms of proactivity again in the future:

> It was my old Manager who said "you shouldn't have done that, you should have gone and found a Manager." I said "to be honest I did look for a Manager but I wasn't going to trail around the entire floor looking for one," to which they said "but do try and find one or pass it to a Section Manager," but I was like "there wasn't any Section Managers either." … That was really gutting and it's like "why do I bother"—it does make you feel "what's the point of me doing what I'm doing." (Carolyn, employee)

Whether employees received positive feedback from others depended largely on two key aspects: first, on stakeholders' awareness of the initiative shown and, second, on stakeholders' approval and communication thereof, of the initiative. However, findings in this study indicate these criteria were not readily fulfilled. First, information flows in the organization were not always transparent, inhibiting sufficient awareness of relevant stakeholders who could have taken action to appreciate a specific initiative. Furthermore, even if sufficiently aware, management in particular did not always approve initiatives by employees, either because the proactive employees had not completed the initiative in a way that managers would have preferred it to happen, or because individual managers more generally did not encourage bottom-up change. In turn, to rely on another's evaluations inhibited individuals in this narrative from experiencing feelings of satisfaction at the end of the proactivity process as well as from maintaining a proactive motivation in the future.

Narrative 2: Proactivity-as-threat

In some cases, informants—employees and managers—described how strong feelings

of anxiety at the onset of the proactivity process, in connection with perceived unsurmountable barriers to change, made them choose not to start implementing their proactive goal. I describe this proactivity-as-threat narrative next.

Abandoning goal to initiate change. Identifying process-related issues did not always lead to initiating change. Instead, in some cases, participants reported how feelings of anxiety in connection with perceiving barriers to change derailed their decision to pursue actions. For instance, manager Clair described how she decided not to implement her goal to change the processes affecting the setup of her direct reports, out of fear that her direct reports would disapprove, although she realized this change would improve her effectiveness as a leader:

> I've thought about changing it but not actually implemented it because it's a drastic change so I have been a bit fearful of it and worried about the reaction that it might get ... I have thought that that is something that I should probably do … but it never feels right, it is something that I've always shied away from … and I've just stuck with what I know is safe. (Clair, section manager)

In addition, in cases in which participants reflected on not having been able to initiate action on work issues they identified as requiring change, this reflection process also induced further negative emotional experiences, related to feeling frustrated about the work situation:

> I see a lot of little things a lot of the time and it is almost an acceptance that that's an issue and because there is work around it you tend to use the work around and not look at the root cause. …It's frustrating because you don't have time to do it–well you probably have got the time but you never seem to find the time to do it, there's always another priority. (Elliott, team manager)

In sum, the initial phase of the proactivity process, both in the proactivity-as-frustration and proactivity-as-threat narratives, was characterized predominantly by indicators of negative emotional experiences, mainly of anger and frustration. These negative feelings, in turn, motivated participants to improve a given work situation. Negative emotions at this stage, particularly feelings of fear as evident in the proactivity-as-threat narrative, were also dominant in derailing participants' decisions to implement their proactive goals, leading to additional feelings of frustration upon reflecting that the issue was not resolved. By contrast,

positive emotional experiences were not salient at the onset of engaging in initiatives in accounts of participants. However, the subsequent phases in the process of proactivity did provide the scope for experiencing substantial positive emotions, particularly for managers at higher ranks in the service center, as I illustrate next, in the proactivity-as-growth narrative.

Narrative 3: Proactivity-as-growth

In the proactivity-as-growth-narrative, at the onset of the proactivity process during the issue-identification stage, informants also reported feelings of anger in the context of *identifying initial, dysfunctional work situations*. However, in contrast to the previous narratives, participants mainly *decided to take action* on the work issue by bringing about change to the work situation themselves, rather than voicing ideas and suggestions for others to change the situation. Sally, a team manager, illustrates such a case in which she decided to implement changes to a work-related process, motivated by feeling annoyed over a complication that process was causing her:

> We have tried a different way because I was getting really fed up of doing them. Another way was going into the system and put it through the system and it should pop up on the particular manager's list but those managers weren't checking and they haven't got time to check them whereas I have so it has got to a point now where I have changed the way I'm doing it. (Sally, team manager)

In sum, Sally's example illustrates how recognizing an issue at work elicited feelings of anger, which prompted individuals to engage in proactive action by *starting to implement* changes to the work situation. Next, participants in the proactivity-as-growth narrative also reported further emotional experiences during the implementation phase. Particularly at the beginning of taking action in their initiatives, and similar to the proactivity-as-frustration narrative, participants in this narrative reported some notions of risk, which they particularly associated with the increased workload in connection with taking on an initiative at work:

> [I felt] nervous only as much as I suppose you've kind of built the expectation so now you've got to deliver so you know this is going to mean not only the hard work sort of getting those contacts but also maintaining those contacts as well. (Bob, team manager)

> [I felt] a bit nervous and so on—I still have those feelings in that sometimes you feel that the work's getting on top of you like today, for example, everything is planned in and then something else goes on and you are all over the place. (Matt, team manager)

Thus, participants who reported additional workload related to taking on a particular initiative experienced some feelings of nervousness. However, importantly, accounts in the proactivity-as-growth narrative also revealed how substantial positive emotional experiences during implementation were possible. Specifically, participants often described how they felt excited about the novelty of their proactive actions, to the extent that these efforts deviated from more routine work participants were used to in completing their daily jobs. The cases of Heather and Elliott illustrate how the novelty of proactive actions promoted strongly positive emotions in the process, and how deviating from one's routine characterized the novelty:

> Prior to doing this I've been a very here and now person. This was sort of my first stab at "ok, well I'm not going to stop working for the here and now but actually I'm going to spend a bit of time thinking about where do we want to be at the end of the next ninety days," which isn't massive long-term planning but it's much longer than I'm used to so I was very excited about it. (Heather, section manager)

> I am in the process of setting up a meeting with all the effective parties within their organization to set up a process which is going to be streamlined for them and a lot of benefit for us because all they seem to do is duplicate their own work. … I am quite excited about it because it is different. I think if you are doing things outside of your normal kind of remit then it is different. (Elliott, team manager)

Both Heather's and Elliott's examples illustrate how individuals experienced feelings of excitement in connection with the novelty of their initiatives. These positive emotions were facilitated when participants felt overall safe in their actions irrespective of possible outcomes of their initiatives. For instance, Emily described how she enjoyed implementing her actions, because she did not perceive any substantive risk. These feelings of overall calmness very much contrasted the feelings of anxiety individuals in the former proactivity narratives had experienced. Similarly, Elliott reported how he felt comfortable in his actions, given that any outcomes of his initiative would result in a win–win situation:

> I enjoy it. It makes me feel very motivated. I don't tend to doubt myself because if it goes wrong then I will learn from that and I will recover the situation because I won't

> have lost anything. (Emily, customer service manager)
>
> I am comfortable with [my initiative] because if it benefits the business to get all of those properties that's great, if it doesn't then I think it is kind of a win-win situation because they either all go, which takes no management for us, or they all come and will be managed by two or three separate teams. (Elliott, team manager)

The above cases illustrate how participants sometimes experienced feelings of nervousness during the implementation stage, in connection with perceived risk. However, they also showed how participants experienced strong positive emotions, in connection with feelings of excitement regarding the novelty of their actions during initiatives, when risk was low—a theme that was uniquely characteristic of the proactivity-as-growth narrative.

Monitoring progress of an ongoing initiative. Another important theme of how the implementation phase of proactivity influenced participants' emotions in the proactivity-as-growth narrative related to the degree of impact—the extent of understanding the progress and scope of change—individuals perceived when monitoring their ongoing initiatives. Here, participants mainly reported feeling excited and happy during implementation in the context of understanding the full impact of their initiatives. Helen's and Phil's accounts illustrate this case: Helen had already started to take charge of investigating a billing process she understood to be wasting money in the organization. When she received more evidence for her initiative, by asking a direct report to check a set of figures required to assess the impact, she experienced excitement in relation to the importance of her initiative. Similarly, Phil felt excited when he realized his initiative would have a significant influence on his department:

> When Valentine, the guy beside me, was checking it and he said to me yes, they have un-billed and I said ok, I will have that, I was quite excited. ... I was actually really excited that we had found an example where somebody had de-billed, that actually that's not what we should be doing, and I could do something about it so I had the ability to then raise that to then a Team Manager. (Helen, section manager)
>
> From the first time actually getting the results after a week of people asking their customers if they were actually up for it [I felt] very happy, very optimistic because I would have been a part of quite…a substantial or significant implementation in the department. (Phil, team manager)

In sum, in the proactivity-as-growth narrative, individuals mainly experienced positive emotions, in relation to a perceived high impact of their initiatives. In addition, although risk in connection with additional workload of initiatives in some cases caused feelings of nervousness, participants more predominantly were able to experience feelings of excitement, in conjunction with a novelty of action that they perceived as overall low in risk. Importantly, as I will outline next, positive emotional experiences during the implementation phase helped promote participants' motivation to engage in future proactivity in the service center.

Reflecting on past proactivity. In particular, individuals in the proactivity-as-growth narrative reported how they experienced emotional experiences at the end of their initiatives mainly in connection with an internal evaluation of how past proactive efforts had gone. For instance, Phil described how he experienced positive feelings of happiness and pride in the context of reflecting on the efforts in which he had engaged throughout his initiative:

> I've never done anything like that before. I've gone off my own back, I did it, I've answered every potential questions that there were, I've considered every eventuality, looked at the benefits, looked at the drawbacks. I was extremely happy with it. (Phil, team manager)

An internal evaluation did not preclude awareness of how other stakeholders reacted to the initiative. However, as the examples of Tracy and Bob illustrate, individuals in the growth narrative saw others' responses as separate from their own evaluations, and related emotional experiences, of the initiative:

> I think that opportunity to come and share the successes that you have been able to achieve in the last six weeks gives [my direct reports] a real buzz … So they enjoy that I think. I'm very proud of them. I enjoy them definitively. (Tracy, customer service manager)

> I suppose it makes me feel good about myself because I'm sort of being proactive—I've seen something that's wrong [and] I'm actually being able to give ideas, suggestions and tools to the guys to do something different, and when you see that changing that's a really good feeling. (Bob, team manager)

The above examples illustrate how the phase of reflection positively influenced participants' affect at the end of proactive episodes. In the proactivity-as-growth narrative,

individuals focused mainly on internal evaluations of their initiatives that, because of their focus not only on the final outcome of the initiative, but also on the build-up of positive emotional experiences in connection with impact and novelty during implementation, helped participants experience feelings of happiness and strengthened future proactive motivation.

Determining motivation to engage in future proactivity. In addition, in cases in which individuals' proactive efforts failed, they, too, experienced feelings of unhappiness at the end of a proactivity episode. However, as mentioned above, an internal evaluation of past proactivity often comprised a more differentiated focus on specific efforts that had gone well versus poorly. In turn, participants in the growth narrative described how reflecting on unsuccessful proactive efforts did not entirely derail their motivation to engage in future proactivity, but rather prompted them to amend and improve specific strategies for engaging in future proactivity. Fiona, a section manager, illustrates this case. She experienced feelings of unhappiness about how she had handled past proactivity; however, she proceeded to use this evaluation of past efforts to adjust her efforts to implement change at work in the future:

> I was trying to get a relationship going with third parties which is quite difficult … and I didn't really understand the protocol. I was supposed to go through the Contract Manager and it all sort of blew up in my face that "you shouldn't be coming talking straight to me." [It makes you feel] stupid, I guess, but also that I hadn't thought it through so I felt unhappy with my thought processes…. so now I wouldn't ever do that again, I would go through the Contract Manager [instead] – I'm not convinced that that is the right thing to do but it is certainly what they want. (Fiona, section manager)

In sum, Fiona's example illustrates how a focus on internal evaluation of past proactivity helped reduce negative emotional experiences in the reflection phase, such that participants were not reliant on other stakeholders (in particular, management) to welcome overall changes made and were, instead, able to focus on more nuanced aspects of the process, including aspects that had previously generated positive emotional experiences. In turn, positive emotional experiences at the end of proactive episodes, such as feeling happy and proud, helped strengthen participants' motivation to engage in future proactivity. Next, I

discuss the findings of this study and proceed to develop a model of emotional experiences in work-related proactivity, in which I elaborate on the mechanisms that helped explain patterns of emotional experiences in the distinct forms of narratives of the proactivity process.

Toward a model of emotional experiences in proactivity

This study highlighted the role of emotional experiences in work-related proactivity. Findings, through the lens of narrative (McAdams, 1999; Pentland, 1999), indicate emotional journeys in proactivity took different forms. First, the proactivity-as-frustration narrative captured informants' experiences of proactivity as a consistently emotionally unpleasant action when initiated and seen through. From a perspective of emotional experiences in the process, predominantly anger-related negative emotions such as feeling frustrated, annoyed, and angry characterized this narrative, mainly independent of the overall success of the initiative. Second, a proactivity-as-threat narrative captured instances of proactivity that derailed at the onset, due to substantive negative emotions of fear that were related to perceived unsurmountable barriers to change. Emotions, in this narrative, while starting off with feelings related to anger, gave way to feelings of fear at the onset of proactivity that evoked an end to the proactivity process before starting to implement the initiative. Third, a proactivity-as-growth narrative reflected instances in which proactivity at the issue-identification stage was initially characterized by negative emotional experiences, such as feeling angry and annoyed, but gave way to mainly positive emotions in the later stages of the process, in particular, feelings of excitement, happiness, and pride, as well as to sustained future motivation to engage in proactivity. In this context, this narrative represents a growth-related trajectory (see Figure 1, for a depiction of the distinct narratives).

Previous research has described narrative, more generally, according to three overarching forms it may take: stability, progression, and regression (Gergen and Gergen, 1997). That is, in making sense of their experiences, individuals may believe the key

concepts of their story remain relatively unchanged (stability narrative), or that things worsen (regression) versus improve (progression) throughout the course of the story, based on an overarching evaluative dimension, over time. Findings in this study can be interpreted through the lens of these core forms of narrative. With a focus on emotional experiences in the process of proactivity, first, the proactivity-as-frustration narrative resembles a "stability" narrative; that is, employees' emotional experiences in the process of proactivity were negative to begin with and they largely remained so throughout the process. By contrast, the proactivity-as-threat narrative was rather "regressive," such that individuals started the process with negative emotional experiences related to anger that initially promoted the process, followed by additional negative emotional experiences related to fear that derailed the process. Finally, the proactivity-as-growth narrative, at its core, resembled a "progressive" narrative, such that although individuals started out with negative emotional experiences, such as frustration and anger, these feelings were largely replaced in the course of the narrative by increasingly positive emotions, such as feeling excited, joyful, and proud in the process, and resulted in increased motivation for proactivity (see Figure 1).

ADD FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

To build theory from narrative, elaborating the generating mechanisms that underlie different narratives (Abbott, 1992), that is, the patterns of emotional experiences in different narratives of the process of proactivity, is essential. What is interesting about the proactivity narratives by individuals in the service center, in particular, is the degree of similarity of emotional experiences at the onset of the proactivity process and, in contrast, the distinct emotional journeys across narratives as the engagement in proactivity progressed. Here, I elaborate on the theoretical mechanisms that explain why participants, across narratives, experienced different qualities of emotional experiences at the different stages of engaging in

work-related proactivity, including *perceiving a gap between current versus desired circumstances* and *barriers to change* (in the issue-identification stage), *risk of novelty in action*, and *degree of impact* (in the implementation stage), as well as *source of evaluation (feedback)—internal versus external* (in the reflection stage) (see Table 1).

ADD TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Emotional experiences in the issue-identification stage. First, at the issue-identification stage of proactivity, individuals across all three proactivity narratives experienced negative emotions related to feelings of anger (e.g., feeling frustrated, angry, or annoyed) upon identifying a dysfunctional work situation. These feelings, in turn, motivated individuals to take action. The current findings speak to the theoretical mechanism of *perceiving a gap*, which I define as individuals' perceptions of differences between a current versus a desired circumstance at work. This gap caused feelings of discomfort in individuals and sparked action to reduce the discrepancy. In particular, employees' and managers' negative emotional experiences with regard to dysfunctional work processes motivated them to engage in work-related proactivity, that is, to go over and above what they were asked to do in their day-to-day, routine work.

In a deviation from narratives 1 and 3, participants in the proactivity-as-threat narrative additionally reported negative emotions related to fear (e.g., feeling anxious, worried) at the issue-identification stage in connection with perceived unsurmountable *barriers to change*, that is, with perceptions of not being able to overcome obstacles associated with the initiative. In these cases, participants continued to experience negative emotions upon recognizing a discrepancy between a current and desired situation; however, they did not take action to resolve the situation. In sum, feelings of anger in the issue-identification phase prompted action in initiatives. By contrast, additional feelings of fear in the issue-identification phase prevented individuals' move toward implementation and instead motivated a recursive circle

of experiencing negative emotions in connection with a dysfunctional work situation.

Emotional experiences in the implementation stage. In the implementation phase of proactivity, participants reported emotional experiences as they started to take action toward a proactive goal. A key theoretical mechanism affecting this stage of initiatives was *risk of novelty in action*. Participants in both the proactivity-as-frustration and proactivity-as-growth narratives perceived proactive actions as novel to the extent that they deviated from more routine work and processes they used in completing their daily jobs. In cases in which risk, that is, the likelihood of undesirable consequences, in novelty was high, participants in both narratives reported experiencing some salience of negative emotions, particularly feelings of nervousness. However, in the proactivity-as-growth narrative in particular, reports of participants provided additional, unique evidence for positive emotional experiences during implementation in connection with feeling comfortable, excited, and joyful about the novelty of the initiative, in cases where they perceived the overall risk of their initiatives to be low.

In addition, participants reported emotional experiences in the context of monitoring progress of their ongoing initiatives. The core theoretical mechanism prevalent here was *degree of impact*. An unclear impact meant participants did not understand if and how their initiatives contributed to the organization, or the degree of progress of the initiative, resulting in negative emotions, such as feelings of disappointment and frustration. These feelings were particularly dominant in the proactivity-as-frustration narrative, at the service center. By contrast, in the proactivity-as-growth narrative, individuals reported how they perceived a high degree of impact and reported positive feelings, such as excitement and happiness, in this context. In sum, emotional experiences, both positive and negative, in this phase helped participants make sense of their actions while implementing their ongoing initiative at work.

Emotional experiences in the reflection stage. When implementation of initiatives had finished, in the overall reflection phase, participants reported emotional experiences as they

thought about their past proactive efforts. In cases in which participants experienced their initiative as successful, emotional experiences at the end of the proactivity process included positive emotions, whereas the opposite (negative emotions) was true when the initiative failed. However, an additional theoretical mechanism emerged in the data that explained differences between the proactivity-as-frustration versus the proactivity-as-growth narrative. Individuals experienced different types of emotions based on whether they sought feedback from others (e.g., management) as a source of evaluation of how well they had done in their initiative, or whether the main source of evaluation was internal, that is, their self-evaluation of whether they had done well in the initiative. As elaborated earlier, an *internal versus external source of evaluation* determined whether participants were more versus less likely to experience positive emotions (e.g., feeling satisfied and proud vs. disengaged and unhappy) at the end of an initiative, largely independent of the overall success of the initiative. Specifically, individuals who used an internal source of evaluation were more likely to emphasize the process, rather than the outcome, of their initiatives, which provided for more balanced emotional experiences, including positive ones, when initiatives overall failed.

Finally, participants reported how their emotional experiences based on reflecting on past proactive efforts determined corresponding changes in motivation to engage in future proactivity at the service center (see Table 1). Thus, in this final phase of proactivity, emotions took on the role of influencing attitudes toward future proactivity at work. To this end, the proactivity-as-frustration and proactivity-as-growth narratives differed substantially, such that individuals in the former narrative had typically experienced high risk and low impact during implementation and focused on external feedback for their initiatives, whereas the reverse pattern was typical for individuals in the proactivity-as-growth narrative. In turn, individuals in the proactivity-as-frustration narrative mainly reported sustained levels of motivation to engage in future proactivity in cases in which initiatives were successful, and a

reduced motivation in cases in which the initiative ultimately failed. By contrast, individuals in the proactivity-as-growth narrative had been enabled to experience positive emotions at various points throughout the process of proactivity that related to enjoying the novelty of their initiative and to understanding their potential impact at work. Because of these earlier positive emotional experiences throughout the process, individuals in the growth narrative reported sustained future motivation to engage in proactivity in cases in which initiatives ultimately failed (e.g., in cases in which management ultimately decided not to embrace a particular change in the organization), and increased motivation when it did succeed. In this sense, individuals who had experienced the proactivity-as-growth narrative were most likely to be motivated to engage in work-related proactivity again in the service center in the future.

Discussion

Previous research has shown positive moods, that is, general pleasant feelings in the workplace, are important in motivating proactivity at work (Bindl et al., 2012; Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015). Less clear from this research is how employees feel about their actual engagement in proactivity, that is, what their emotions are in the process and what role these emotions, especially negative emotions, play in proactivity. To develop an understanding of emotional experiences in proactivity, I conducted a qualitative study at the service center of a multinational energy provider. The data revealed different narratives (McAdams, 1999; Pentland, 1999) of emotional journeys in the process of engaging in work-related proactivity. Importantly, each narrative took the form of distinct patterns of emotional experiences across the process of proactivity, and yielded implications for individuals' motivation to engage in proactivity in the service center again, in the future: First, a proactivity-as-frustration narrative captured individuals' emotional experiences in proactivity as a consistently unpleasant action to be initiated and seen through. Second, a proactivity-as-threat narrative described proactive episodes that derailed at the onset, due to

feelings of fear related to perceived unsurmountable barriers to change. Third, a proactivity-as-growth narrative reflected instances in which proactivity, although initiated by negative emotional experiences, was mainly characterized by a positive emotional change toward feelings of excitement, happiness, and pride as the process continued, as well as sustained motivation to engage in proactivity in the future. Findings also revealed theoretical mechanisms that explained how emotional experiences differed across narratives, including *perceiving a gap between current versus desired circumstances* and *barriers to change* (in the issue-identification stage), *risk of novelty in action*, and *degree of impact* (in the implementation stage), and *source of evaluation—internal versus external* (in the reflection stage).

Theoretical implications

The findings of this study contribute to existing theory on affect and work-related proactivity in several important ways. First, the present findings help clarify the role of negative affect in proactivity. Previous research has mostly found inconclusive results regarding the role of negative affect in proactivity (e.g., Den Hartog and Belschak, 2007; Fay and Sonnentag, 2012). These mixed findings may be due to different functionalities of negative affect for human behavior. For instance, past affect research indicates that although negative emotions may signal a change is needed (Carver and Scheier, 1990), they may also yield an avoid rather than approach orientation (Higgins, 1997; Rodell and Judge, 2009), derail the focus away from the goal to be implemented (Beal et al., 2005), and ultimately lead to goal blockage (Berkowitz, 1989). The findings from this study offer a more differentiated, goal-regulatory perspective on negative affect and performance at work, indicating the role of negative emotions in proactivity may depend both on the *quality of negative emotional experiences* and the *stage of proactivity* at which these feelings occur: At the onset of proactivity, feelings of anger and frustration were beneficial to motivating proactive action by

signaling a gap between a current and desired situation and prompting action to reduce the discrepancy. By contrast, feelings of fear at this stage, which were unique to the proactivity-as-threat narrative, guided employees toward not "crossing the rubicon" (Gollwitzer, 1990) to commence taking action in the situation. In addition, negative emotions, such as anxiety and disappointment, once actual implementation had commenced, as evident in the proactivity-as-frustration and to some extent in the proactivity-as-growth narrative, did not necessarily derail actions; however, they rendered proactive episodes emotionally unpleasant and, in the reflection phase, negative emotions such as feeling discouraged shaped attitudes toward overall proactivity, such that they reduced individuals' motivation to engage in work-related proactivity, in the future. The present findings also meaningfully complement previous research suggesting happy employees are more likely to engage in positive behaviors at work (e.g., Forgas and George, 2001; Sonnentag, 2015) and are, in particular, more proactive (Bindl et al., 2012; Cangiano et al., 2017; Fay and Sonnentag, 2012). This previous proactivity research focused on *moods* as an indicator of affect, that is, generalized feelings when at work (Rosenberg, 1998). The present study, by contrast, focused on *emotions*, that is, feelings that occurred in the immediate context of, and with reference to, proactive episodes. The findings from this study add to overall research on affect and positive behaviors at work by indicating that, in addition to general positive moods that likely reflect employees' broader motivation to engage in positive behaviors at work, negative emotional experiences related to anger that signal a discrepancy between a desired and current situation may be particularly powerful in promoting individuals' engagement in work-related proactivity.

Second, relatedly, the present findings help us understand employees' patterns of emotions in the process of proactivity—their *emotional journeys*; that is, this study is the first to draw on the form of narratives (McAdams, 1999; Pentland, 1999) in investigating how individuals experience the process of engaging in proactivity. To adopt this qualitative lens

into the lived experiences of individuals (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) allowed for accounting for the full range of emotional experiences informants reported, across the entire process of the proactivity process. In this vein, emotions that were reported in proactive episodes ranged from negative feelings such as frustration, anger, distress, or disappointment to positive feelings such as feeling pleased, relaxed, excited, enthusiastic, or joyful, and thus captured all four quadrants of the affective circumplex (Russell, 2003). Thus, the findings of this study indicate emotional experiences in proactivity may be much more nuanced than they are typically perceived to be when quantitatively assessing the role of affect for proactivity, using established measures such as the PANAS scale (Watson et al., 1988), and that distinct emotions matter more or less at different stages of the process. For instance, informants in the proactivity-as-growth narrative reported more complex emotions, in particular, feelings of pride, at the end of their proactivity episodes. These present findings meaningfully link with emotions research that has shown individuals will experience pride in the context of achieving challenging tasks (Lewis et al., 1992) and they indicate research on complex emotions, in particular on the role of pride in work-related proactivity, may be a fruitful research avenue to pursue in the future.

The notion of emotional journeys informants took in work-related proactivity also meaningfully links with emotions research, more broadly. In this sense, the proactivity-as-frustration and proactivity-as-threat narratives, which were both characterized by predominantly negative feelings across the process of proactivity, were both associated with decreased motivation to engage in future work-related proactivity. The present findings are plausible in the context of affect research that has shown more broadly that persistent negative feelings likely result in physical and psychological states of exhaustion (Gross and John, 2003) and are thus detrimental to the replenishment of self-regulatory resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Self-regulatory resources, in turn, are required for individuals' engagement

in behaviors (Muraven and Baumeister, 2000). In this context, these narratives provide a useful lens for understanding why future proactivity is likely inhibited, based on previous negative emotions in the process. By contrast, findings from the proactivity-as-growth narrative, where negative emotions at the onset of the proactivity process gave way to mainly positive emotions, such as feelings of excitement, happiness, and joy, and which was linked to greater future motivation to become proactive at work, meaningfully link with Fredrickson's (2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, whereby positive emotions should contribute to building resources at work. Specifically, the current findings show, in the form of the proactivity-as-growth narrative, how employees were more likely to engage in future proactivity and how this motivation was largely based on positive emotional experiences, particularly in the implementation and reflection phases of the process. The present study thus adds to previous emotions research with a more grounded perspective of how positive emotional experiences help shape motivation for positive behaviors at work.

Finally, the findings of this study help us understand the role of autonomy in proactivity. Previous findings suggest employees with low discretion in their jobs will not readily be motivated to engage in proactivity at work (Frese et al., 2007) and individuals at lower ranks may face different types of challenges in proactivity, compared to those at higher ranks (Berg et al., 2010). The present findings add to this research by explaining *why* employees with higher discretion in their jobs will be more proactive in their organizations. Specifically, although the overarching work context represented a constrained work environment in which all individuals focused primarily on work-related proactivity related to reducing stressors and work issues (Fay and Sonnentag, 2002), meaningful differences in levels of autonomy additionally existed between employees and managers in the service center. In this context, employees, due to lower levels in job autonomy, mostly required input from their managers to implement changes, and reported high levels of negative emotions in

connection with how others perceived, supported, and approved of their initiatives. The present findings are linked to the notion of a "proactivity paradox" (Campbell, 2000), which implies managers often only reward initiative that is enacted according to management expectations. The scripted nature of call centers (Holman, 2005), in this context, likely enabled management to identify when employees did not engage in initiatives in such "organizationally desirable ways" (see also Vough et al., 2017, for an in-depth discussion of routines in proactivity). The notion of a proactivity paradox is also closely linked to the literature on organizational power, which would suggest employees at higher ranks will generally have greater status and influence in the organization (Magee and Galinsky, 2008). In this vein, managers, who were the predominant group in the proactivity-as-growth narrative (see Table 1) and who had higher levels of job autonomy, had the opportunity to implement changes at work more easily and often reported positive emotional experiences during implementation in connection with novelty of action that was characterized by low levels of risk, and in connection with a perceived high impact of their initiatives through access to informational sources and structures in the organization. These were positive aspects in the process of proactivity that employees at lower ranks largely lacked. Managers also focused less on how others appreciated their initiatives, which facilitated positive affect at the end of initiatives. In sum, the findings of this study provide initial evidence for how the proactivity paradox may influence emotional experiences in the process of proactivity, such that positive affect in the process is likely inhibited for employees with lower job autonomy.

Practical implications, limitations, and future directions

Proactivity matters to organizations (Thomas et al., 2010; Tornau and Frese, 2013). However, the findings of this study suggest employees, as they engage in work-related proactivity, may enter different emotional journeys throughout the process. In the most positive case, successful episodes within the proactivity-as-growth narrative resulted in

improved motivation to engage in future proactivity; in the worst case, failed episodes within the proactivity-as-frustration narrative, as well as within the proactivity-as-threat narrative, resulted in decreased motivation to engage in future proactivity. These findings suggest that, assuming an organization wishes to promote a proactive workforce that readily initiates changes, it should minimize perceived barriers to change, as well as perceived risk, and maximize perceived safety, which enables individuals to enjoy the novelty element of their initiatives. In this case, organizations should also ensure, with respect to promoting a high perceived degree of impact, that employees are kept informed of their initiatives. In addition, findings of this study suggest that to promote a proactive workforce, organizations may need to implement structures to facilitate meaningful feedback and signal appreciation to employees on the outcomes of their initiatives. Finally, to enable a proactivity-as-growth narrative, organizations should delegate as much "action" in initiatives to employees themselves, to provide them rich experiences of proactive efforts on which to later reflect.

Note that although proactivity has overall been found to be beneficial for organizations, the extent to which any of these implications are relevant for a particular organization may well depend on how ready the organization is to welcome employee initiative. In particular, in organizations that restrict employee autonomy and emphasize the importance of efficiency in the organization (e.g., Holman, 2005), management may be less sympathetic to enabling the proactivity-as-growth narrative, in particular. However, research suggests these organizations, too, may require and benefit from improvements at work (Adler and Borys, 1996; Engel, 1970). In this context, the case of the service center constitutes a good example of how, even in a constrained environment, proactivity may be important for organizations, and of how understanding what motivates employees to engage in this behavior is important.

This investigation has several limitations that may provide fruitful avenues for future research. First, how the findings from this study may have been different in other contexts is

worth contemplating. In particular, the monitored nature of service-center work appeared to have emphasized episodes of work-related proactivity aimed at stopping or preventing problems from occurring, rather than aimed at realizing ideals and future possibilities (Spychala and Sonnentag, 2011; Strauss and Parker, 2018). As such, negative emotional experiences were highly salient in the initial phase of proactivity, in the context of issue identification. In more creative work professions—for instance, among architects or journalists—individuals might experience more positive emotions at the onset of proactivity. For example, in other work contexts, the "stability" narrative of proactivity might start and remain on a positive emotional level of experience. These narratives might be more closely related to vision-orientated, exploratory forms of proactivity (Strauss and Parker, 2018). In this vein, investigating employees' experiences of proactivity across contexts is important.

Second, this investigation has methodological limitations. Specifically, because I drew on past and current episodes, findings are prone to recall biases (Eisenhardt, 1989) in episodes of proactivity. However, research has shown remembered affect to be meaningful to individuals (Fredrickson, 2000) and likely more powerful than concurrent affect in guiding future behavior (Wirtz et al., 2003). The current design thus facilitated insights into feelings being relevant for employees in informing their future motivation to engage in proactivity.

Conclusion

To conclude, in addition to completing their core tasks, employees sometimes engage in self-initiated action aimed at bringing about positive change in the workplace. Findings in this study suggest employees' emotional experiences in the process of engaging in their initiatives play an important role in influencing the likelihood of bringing about such positive change. To promote a work environment that will benefit from proactive staff, organizations will need to appreciate and understand employees' actions, as well as their feelings.

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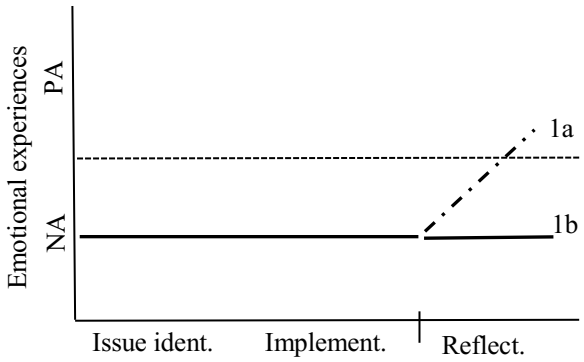
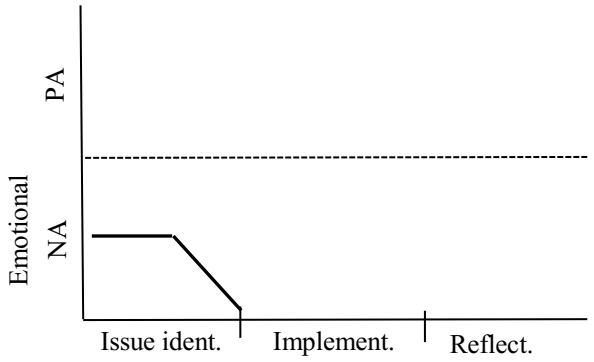
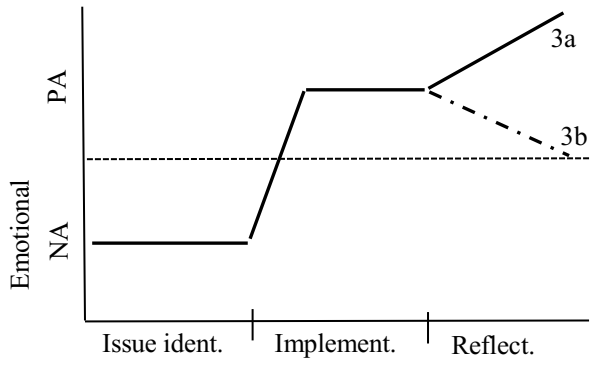
Table 1. Theoretical mechanisms and emotional experiences across narratives

Proactivity narratives	Predominant group of participants	Theoretical mechanisms and indications of emotions across process of proactivity					Implications for future proactivity motivation
		Issue identification		Implementation		Reflection	
		Perceived gap - current vs desired circumstances	*Barriers to change*	*Risk of novelty in action*	*Degree of impact*	*Source of evaluation (feedback) – internal vs. external*	
Narrative 1: Proactivity-as-frustration	Baseline employees	High perceptions of gap – feeling frustrated, angry, and annoyed	n/a	High perceived risk – feeling nervous, anxious	Low perceived impact – feeling disappointed		
1a: Successful episodes						External evaluation – feeling contented, satisfied	Sustained
1b: Failed episodes						External evaluation – feeling disappointed, discouraged	Decreased
Narrative 2: Proactivity-as-threat	Baseline employees & Managers	High perceptions of gap – feeling frustrated, angry, and annoyed	Perceived unsurmountable barriers – feeling fearful, worried	n/a	n/a	n/a	Decreased
Narrative 3: Proactivity-as-growth	Managers	High perceptions of gap – feeling frustrated, angry, and annoyed	n/a	Low risk – feeling comfortable, excited vs high risk – feeling nervous, anxious	High perceived impact – feeling excited, happy		
3a: Successful episodes						Internal evaluation – feeling proud, happy	Increased
3b: Failed episodes						Internal evaluation – feeling unhappy	Sustained

Notes. n/a=not available; i.e., this theme of emotional experiences did not feature prominently in a given narrative.

Figure 1 Emotional Narratives of the Process of Proactivity

 Narrative 1: *Proactivity-as-frustration (stability narrative)*	Narrative 1a represents the typical form of the proactivity-as-frustration narrative for successful episodes of proactivity, where employees received positive feedback for their proactivity in the end. Narrative 1b represents the typical form of the frustration narrative for failed episodes of proactivity.
 Narrative 2: *Proactivity-as-threat (regressive narrative)*	Narrative 2 represents the typical form of the proactivity-as-threat narrative. Here, participants reported how they experienced additional negative emotions of fear, and subsequently stopped their proactive efforts, in the issue-identification phase.
 Narrative 3: *Proactivity-as-growth (progressive narrative)*	Narrative 3a represents the typical form of the proactivity-as-growth narrative for successful episodes of proactivity. Narrative 3b represents the typical form of the growth narrative for failed episodes of proactivity, with a mix of positive and negative emotions at the end of the episode.

Notes: PA indicates positive affect; NA indicates negative affect. Issue ident. = issue identification phase; implement. = implementation phase; reflect. = reflection phase of proactivity.